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DALIT ASSERTION. *Oxford India Short Introductions. By Sudha Pai. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013. xli, 201 pp. (Tables.) US\$17.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-19-809593-4.*

During the 2009 national elections, with the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP – Majority People’s Party) riding high on the back of its electoral success in the 2007 State Elections in Uttar Pradesh, the party leader Mayawati was openly touted as a potential Prime Minister and was regarded as a key player in national politics. Fast forward to the recently concluded 2014 Lok Sabha elections and the BSP hardly merits a mention. A low key campaign culminated in a wipe-out in which the party failed to secure a single victory. Other Dalit parties, such as the Tamil *Viduthalai Ciruthaigal Katchi* (Liberation Panther Party) whose leader Thirumavalavan came to prominence as an MP during protests over the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka in 2009, and his interventions on the Ambedkar Cartoon controversy in 2012, also drew a blank. Some of this is due to the ‘Modi wave’ which dominated media coverage long before it became a reality, but it also reflects uncertainties, questions and critiques surrounding Dalit politics. Professor Sudha Pai’s introduction to *Dalit Assertion*, thus, is both timely and welcome and helps to contextualise and explain some of the central processes and debates around Dalit mobilisation in India.

After an introduction to the emergence of Dalit politics – both institutional and extra-institutional - the book comprises five key chapters that deal with the ideological underpinnings of Dalit assertion, mobilisation at the grass-roots level, the performance of Dalit political parties, the rise of Middle Class activism and a consideration of possible future directions. The introduction sets the scene well; it is neither too detailed and dense for the non-specialist nor so simplistic as to put off more expert readers. Pai highlights the rise of Dalit assertion in multiple forms but also outlines the fissures within the Dalit category and analyses what is described as an ‘impasse’ in Dalit politics. We then receive an overview of

the ideological strands of the Dalit struggle. Here the book focuses on three prominent ideological currents; the Dravidian, Gandhian and Ambedkarite (including Kanshi Ram's adaptation of Ambedkar) approaches. The reflection on non-Brahminism in South and West India is heartening given the frequent neglect of Southern experiences in such accounts. The key positions of each strand are outlined and Pai reflects on how popular and durable each approach has been, before concluding that Ambedkarite ideology is on the rise and best captures the intent of younger Dalits. Some reflection on why Communist parties failed to address Dalit issues and retain the Dalits who were initially mobilised in class struggles would have been welcome here, though I would not quarrel with the main focus of the chapter.

The rationale for the three substantive chapters is persuasive, since there is clearly no *one* form or mode of assertion. The tripartite division into grassroots, political party and middle class activism allows Pai to capture important currents of Dalit mobilisation and assertion. The book draws on examples and research from across India in these three chapters which demonstrate the author's familiarity with key developments and trends in Dalit struggles. The first chapter here documents the localised challenges to caste discrimination that have tackled forms of untouchability head on, but also reflects on the impact these contests have had. Pai notes how challenges from below are often met by violent responses, not from those at the apex of the caste hierarchy but from Backward Caste groups seeking to defend their power and prestige. The book also charts the rise of intra-Dalit conflicts as different castes compete for scarce resources and rally behind different leaders or strategies. One reason why Dalit assertion has slightly stalled of late, it is suggested, arises from these internal divisions. Nor are these divisions confined to caste, as we see in the chapter on parties: the move to political institutionalisation has entailed a split between the radical Dalits who wish to break with the system and annihilate caste, and more pragmatic activists who

seek a share of power within the existing system of political relationships. The compromises and debates entailed in this process are captured here and offer one reason for the decline in Dalit political fortunes, as does the discussion of how Dalits at the grassroots are increasingly frustrated by identity politics and desire economic and social development. Nevertheless, as Pai notes, Dalit parties have ‘introduced greater social inclusiveness into the political system’ (p107).

The final substantive chapter addresses the debate about an impasse from a different angle. What Pai shows here is that newly educated and affluent Dalits who benefitted from early assertion and reservation but are now disillusioned by Dalit parties are not necessarily insulating themselves from less fortunate Dalits, but are engaged in a range of interventions that seek to rethink Dalit involvement in society. This chapter focuses on the Bhopal document, the debates around reservation in the private sector, and calls for supplier diversity. These campaigns mark a recognition that the significance of the state as an employer is declining and demonstrate a shift in Dalit aspirations. The call for supplier diversity shows an understanding of innovative policies that might undermine the networks of caste that inform decisions about who to employ or trade with and serve to perpetuate forms of exclusion. The conclusion then thinks through key issues with each of these main strands of Dalit struggle and reflects on how a more meaningful and socially equitable democracy might be attained. At a time when Dalit voices in Europe and the US are increasingly prominent, some reflection on global links and struggles would have been welcome, as would some consideration of the increasing use of social media by Dalit activists, but these are minor quibbles. Overall this is an excellent and highly recommended introduction to the diversity and impact of Dalit assertion which helps us think through the current state of Dalit politics.

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